



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

- 📖 Intently Watching
(*Children*, pp. 37-38)
- 📖 In Her Heart
(*Children*, pp. 51-52)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
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Christian Reflection

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The Childhood of Jesus

The mystery of God's incarnation in the child Jesus is a memorable theme in the Gospel of Luke. Why is it important that Jesus "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom" through the influence of his human family?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:39-52

Responsive Reading†

Within the Father's house
the Son has found his home;
and to his temple suddenly
the Lord of Life has come.

**The doctors of the law
gaze on the wondrous child,
and marvel at his gracious words
of wisdom undefiled.**

Lord, visit then our souls,
and teach us by your grace
each dim revealing of yourself
with loving awe to trace;

**till we behold your face,
and know, as we are known,
you, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
co-equal Three in One.**

Reflection

Luke records two stories about Jesus' childhood: his presentation in the temple as a newborn (2:22-39) and his visit to the temple for Passover when he was twelve years old (2:41-52). The latter is depicted in "Jesus Among the Doctors," a colorful manuscript illumination from circa 1400-10 (*Children*, cover and p. 50).

The temple location and other details emphasize that Mary and Joseph faithfully raised their son according to Jewish law. They took him to be circumcised as "required by the law of the Lord" (2:21, 39) and traveled each year as a family to the Passover festival (2:41). On his twelfth Passover visit, Jesus stays behind for three days, "sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions" (2:46). As he shares the ideas and questions stirring in his heart and surely nurtured by his parents' care, the gathered teachers "were amazed at his understanding and his answers" to their replies.

When his anxious parents finally find him, Jesus says: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" After all, they had faithfully brought Jesus to the temple for years!

"Despite his enjoyment of what he was doing and the fact that neither Mary nor Joseph understands him, Jesus obediently follows them. From this point, Mary's role in the story takes a different tone," Hornik notes. "While continuing as the loving mother who will guide her son, she must accept not only the sometimes painful separation as he matures, but also the deep mystery of the earthly role given him by his Father."



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In his human family, Jesus grew physically, intellectually, and spiritually in ways that please God and humans (2:40, 52). By carefully choosing words that echo 1 Samuel 2:26 (“Now the boy Samuel was growing in stature and in favor both with the LORD and with men”), Luke relates the loving sacrifices of Mary and Joseph to those of Hannah and Elkanah, who selflessly dedicated their child Samuel to God’s service in the temple.

These stories are the last time the gospels mention Joseph. “We must assume, as the many writers of various legends and apocryphal stories throughout the later centuries did,” Hornik writes, “that [Jesus] was taught by his father Joseph the skills and wisdom learned from his own life as a carpenter.” Indeed the people of Nazareth associated Jesus with his father: “Is not this Joseph’s son?” and “Is not this the carpenter’s son?” they wondered when Jesus spoke with prophetic wisdom in their synagogue (Luke 4:22 and Matthew 13:55).

Gerrit van Honthorst’s *Childhood of Christ*, imagines the young Jesus assisting his carpenter father as he works into the night (*Children*, p. 36). The candle he holds to light the piece of wood on which Joseph is working has religious iconographic significance, reminding us that Jesus is the light of the world.

Study Questions

1. How is Jesus depicted as both a teacher and a pupil in *Jesus Among the Doctors*? What insights into Luke 2:41-51 do you gain from this manuscript illumination?
2. Compare and contrast Luke 2:40 and 2:52. How do these verses guide our interpretation of Jesus’ visit to the temple?
3. What might children enjoy in *Childhood of Jesus* and in *Jesus Among the Doctors*?
4. According to “O Master Workman of the Race,” how does the carpenter of Nazareth inspire and guide our lives?

Departing Hymn: “O Master Workman of the Race”

O Master Workman of the race, O Man of Galilee,
who with the eyes of early youth eternal things did see,
we thank you for your boyhood faith
that shone your whole life through;

“Did you not know it is my work, my Father’s work to do?”
O carpenter of Nazareth, builder of life divine,
who fashions us to God’s own law, yourself the fair design,
build us a tower of Christ-like height,
that we the land may view,
and see, like you, our noblest work, our Father’s work to do.

O Lord, who does the vision send and gives to each the task,
and with the task sufficient strength,
show us your will, we ask;
give us a conscience bold and good, give us a purpose true,
that it may be our highest joy our Father’s work to do.

Jay T. Stocking (1912), alt.

Suggested Tunes: ELLACOMBE or FOREST GREEN

† “Within the Father’s House,” vv. 1, 2, 5, & 7, James R. Woodford (1863), alt.

The Childhood of Jesus

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To understand how the Gospel of Luke presents the childhood of Jesus.
2. To reflect on the model of Mary and Joseph in caring for Jesus as a child.
3. To consider how Christian artists, in painting and song, have depicted the young Jesus and his earthly family.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Children (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “O Master Workman of the Race,” locate the tune ELLACOMBE in your church’s hymnal. An alternate tune is FOREST GREEN.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with prayer that members will faithfully nurture the children in their families and the congregation, and be blessed by seeing these children grow physically, intellectually, and spiritually.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 2:39-52 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

The gospels offer little information concerning the childhood of Jesus. The Gospels of Mark and John have no information, and the Gospel of Matthew mentions only the visit of the magi, and Herod’s subsequent killing of the young children in Bethlehem and his family’s flight into Egypt. The Gospel of Luke records two stories: Jesus’ presentation in the temple as a newborn for circumcision, and his visit to the temple for Passover when he is twelve.

This study deals with the latter account (Luke 2:41-51), as well as the summary statements in 2:40 and 2:52 that frame the story and guide our reading of it.

We should not over-interpret or speculate beyond the few insights that the Bible provides into these years between Jesus’ birth and adulthood. However, we can study this material for the light it sheds on childhood and our care for children.

Luke highlights Mary and Joseph’s nurturing of Jesus (though, as typical in this gospel, Joseph remains in the background): they raise Jesus according to Jewish law and take him each year to the Passover festival at the temple in Jerusalem.

Why did his parents lose track of Jesus on their return from the Passover? They are traveling with a number of extended family and friends from Nazareth (2:44-45). Some scholars suggest that because Jesus was on the verge of adulthood, he could have been traveling with either the women (as a child) or

the men (as an adult); perhaps Mary thought Jesus was with Joseph, and Joseph thought he was with the women. Once again Luke highlights the parents' love as evidenced in their anxiety when Jesus is discovered to be missing and their return to Jerusalem to find him.

Luke also focuses on Jesus' growth in the context of his parents' care (2:40 and 2:52) and his love for them. Though they cannot fully understand his reasons for staying with the teachers in the temple, he is "obedient to them" (2:50-51). Perhaps Luke's framing comments in 2:40 and 2:52 (because they are echoes of 1 Samuel 2:26) tie these two themes together: Jesus' growth is possible because of the love and commitment of Mary and Joseph, just as Samuel's growth flowed from his parents' sacrificial love.

Of course, we wonder about Jesus' relationship with Joseph. Did Jesus practice carpentry with him? Since Joseph is not listed among Jesus' family at the beginning of his public ministry (Matthew 13:55-56), an early church tradition held that Joseph was much older than Mary and had died before Jesus was thirty. Gerrit van Honthorst's *Childhood of Christ* imagines a scene in which Jesus is about twelve, which is the time of Luke's story. Both *Childhood of Christ* and *Jesus Among the Doctors* depict Joseph as an older man.

Study Questions

1. Jesus, elevated on a throne above books of scripture, teaches from a book to the teachers below who look toward him. A nimbus is prominent around his head. Yet, Jesus is also a pupil, listening to his parents as he holds a wax writing tablet. In a single image with two moments, the artist points to the paradox that his mother, Mary, "treasured in her heart."
2. Both passages emphasize Jesus' physical, intellectual, and spiritual growth, repeating the themes of "wisdom" and "God's favor." The second passage refers to "Jesus" instead of "the child," and adds that he also grew in "human favor." Jesus has matured, achieved an identity, and by his wisdom and obedience gained the admiration of his human family as well as the teachers in the temple.
3. *Childhood of Jesus* presents a child's dream: to be present with and a helper in a parent's work. Children may examine the interesting tools, the two angels at the right of the composition, and Jesus' candle, but they will surely notice that "Jesus intently watches his father with admiration and tenderness. Children are especially impressionistic at this age and parents are their most important role models."

Certainly the rich colors, repeated gestures (e.g., Jesus and the teachers pointing to the books; Joseph and Jesus pointing back toward the temple scene), cartoon-like expressiveness of the faces, and *istoria* or multi-part narrative structure that may be read from left to right, make *Jesus Among the Doctor* easy for children to interpret. They may enjoy the image details: the colorful books, Jesus' writing tablet, the cut-away view of the temple interior revealing its simple curved bench, platform, stairs, and doors. "Children will relate to Jesus as a child who, like themselves, wants to be listened to by adults," Hornik suggests. "So often, children have much to say to busy adults who could learn much by taking time to sit down and listen; their honest and clear-thinking minds may reveal profound insights."

4. In the first stanza, the young Jesus is a model of faith and purity of heart because he is focused on "my Father's work to do." The second stanza shifts to the metaphor of carpentry and extends Jesus' role in our discipleship: he is not only the model for our lives ("yourself the fair design"), but the one who "fashions us" to live in ways that please God. How does Jesus enable us to live for God? He raises us to a height to view the world from a less narrow and selfish perspective, to see the landscape of our lives as he himself sees it; he calls us to a particular task for God; and he emboldens our conscience to pursue God's purpose. Jesus enables us to make God's purpose our own, so that in doing "our Father's work" we find true fulfillment and joy.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.